

skeleton of a small kitten he'd brought home years ago. It had disappeared one night and he and Ruth had assumed that it had run off, or the coyotes had gotten him.

Ruth finished up as Ellis mopped the last of the mess. She told him to go out front and turn the water on, that something had finally been fixed right.

But she was wrong. The entire faucet came off the fixture with such force that it dug into the ceiling and stuck there, and the geyser roared like before, and Ruth bowled Ellis over on her way out front again, yelling back at him to get his dumb ass to the phone to call a damned plumber.

THE BOG MUMMY

Clete pushed through the bathroom door and was confronted by his naked, one-breasted mother-in-law sitting on the toilet. She let out a noise like a bleating goat and curled into a fetal position on top of the bowl, to hide the front of her body from him. She called him a son-of-a-bitch before he could get the door closed.

He clicked the door shut and leaned against the wall in the hallway, breathing hard, saying, "Oh Jesus." It hadn't been a pretty sight: she was a desiccated, wiry little woman, bald as an egg from the chemo, her wrinkled brown skin making her look like an extraterrestrial off the cover of one of those supermarket tabloids she was always buying.

He used the other bathroom and got out of the house before the old lady could tell his wife. He wheeled the lawnmower out of the garage and started it up. When he was two swaths into it, Mom hobbled out the front door, wearing her bathrobe and her crow-black wig. Clete froze, holding tight to the roaring mower. She stepped out onto the lawn, hit him in the knee with her cane, called him a dirty pervert, and limped back into the house.

She died in her bed a week later. Clete's wife Juanita, her baby daughter, discovered her in the morning, as stiff and dry as an old bog mummy, in the fetal position again, wrapped in her blue flannel nightgown. Clete pulled his wailing wife from the bed and called 911.

The will specified cremation. She'd already paid for it. And a trip into eternal orbit. She'd already paid for that too: a company based in Florida, Eternal Orbits Inc. The company's brochure said they'd launch the dear departed with two hundred and ninety-nine other deceased souls in

their state-of-the-art space capsule, its bulkheads lined with shelves holding the brass urns. They would revolve endlessly around the planet, presumably dodging incoming meteors and the relatively stationary T.V. satellites.

Clete and Juanita hopped a flight to Florida, Mom's brass urn tucked down in the bottom of her daughter's handbag. As the plane lifted off, Clete leaned back in his seat and said, "I don't believe this." Juanita dabbed her eyes with a napkin and said, "It's what Mom wanted."

The relatives huddled on the edge of the swamp, waiting for Eternal Orbits' first launch. The departed rested comfortably inside the capsule in seven large green trash bags, waiting for blastoff. The brass urns rested comfortably in the warehouse, waiting for meltdown.

The official from Eternal Orbits called the countdown through a bullhorn. The rocket smoked and rumbled in its scrap lumber scaffold, then shot into the sky. It did a big half-mile arc and crashed down into the swamp.

While the crowd stood frozen in the morning chill, stunned, the official from Eternal Orbits made a dash for his company car. The sound of his engine firing woke the crowd. They swarmed the car, cursing and screaming, hanging on as he crept across the parking lot. By the time he'd hit the highway, he'd lost them all, or so he thought. He grinned as he saw them fading in his rear-view mirror, still chasing him in their futile pursuit. He turned up the radio and settled into the plush upholstery, feeling good, until the woman's face appeared in his windshield from the roof, upside down, screaming and grimacing horribly.

LOTTO

It was lottery night. Ellis drove down to the Seven-Eleven to buy two tickets, one for Ruth and one for himself. He couldn't park in the lot, it looked like a damned party was going on: a suitcase-sized cassette player blared on top of the newspaper machines, shirtless boys in low slung jeans and baseball hats danced with short-skirted, bikini-topped girls, stag groups stood around the fringes, smoking cigarettes and drinking beer from quart bottles.

Ellis parked in the street and waded through the crowd, catching a dancer's elbow in the kidney. He pushed through the glass door. "What the hell is going on out there?" he asked the gum-chewing cashier. She'd been leaning on the counter, looking out the window at the festivities. She